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INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 3136
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RUEKJCS/OSD WASHDC
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RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 1423
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 3471
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2857
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO BRUSSELS BE
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BISHKEK 000675

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/CEN

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [KIRF](#) [KG](#)
SUBJECT: RESTRICTING RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN KYRGYZSTAN

REF: BISHKEK 43

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Classified By: Classified by Charge d'Affaires Lee Litzenberger, for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: Six months have passed since Kyrgyzstan adopted a restrictive law on religious organizations (reftel). An embassy survey of government officials and religious leaders revealed that the new law has only been partially implemented. Government officials said that a working group had been formed to address criticisms of the law. While representatives of the Muslim and Russian Orthodox communities supported the law, smaller denominations continued to express the fear that their activities would be curtailed. A group of evangelical Christians is planning to challenge the law in the Constitutional Court. If implemented as written, the law would force many small religious groups underground, and outside the scope of official oversight. End Summary.

NEW RELIGION LAW NOT YET ETCHED IN STONE

12. (C) State Agency for Religious Affairs (SARA) Director Kanybek Osmonaliyev told Poloff that, in response to (Western) criticism of the new religious organizations law, a working group composed of religious leaders, experts, and lawyers would review the law and suggested modifications. Osmonaliyev said that the government was also considering a draft law to cover religious education (septel).

GOVERNMENT ALLIES IN THE RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY

13. (C) Deputy Mufti Lugmar Aji Guahunov backed the law, and advised Poloff that "Muslims across the country" supported tightening restrictions on religious activities. Guahunov admitted that the law needed some "adjusting," and said he was a member of the working group reviewing the law. Guahunov assured Poloff that Christians would also participate in the working group.

¶4. (C) Father Pavel Sinegubov of the Russian Orthodox Church said he supported the law, claiming it would prevent "unwanted and misguided religious groups" from corrupting the population. He said that the new regulations would empower the government to examine the principles and methodology of "invading" religions. Sinegubov expressed concern regarding the mass emigration of ethnic Russians from Kyrgyzstan, which prompted Poloff to ask if each Russian Orthodox congregation would be able to meet the 200-member minimum registration requirement established by the new law. Sinegubov responded, "No, but we will just see how the law is implemented before we start worrying."

FLYING BELOW THE RADAR

¶5. (C) Pastor Tatiana Sotnik of the Universal Church told Poloff that her mixed congregation of more than 100 ethnic Kyrgyz, Kazakh, and Russian believers had worshiped unimpeded, but unregistered, since 2005. She noted that "government officials know that we exist, but we do our best not to remind them," claiming her church last communicated with SARA in 2006. At that time, SARA had suspended the church's registration because its charter listed two locations and did not clearly define their faith. Sotnik believed the new religious organizations law would hamper their chances for official registration, but said her church would operate "with or without the government's stamp."

¶6. (C) Pastor Kairbek Manybaev of the Good News Evangelical Church informed Poloff that his church, which originally registered three years ago, had moved and now lacked proper

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registration. He attributed the church's continued ability to function to his congregation's ethnic makeup of predominantly ethnic Kyrgyz and his openness during visits by Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) and state security services (GKNB) personnel. The minister branded the new law unconstitutional, and questioned how the government could legally prevent him from speaking about his faith "on the bus or in a cafe" (a reference to the provision in the law prohibiting proselytism) or "bringing my children to church with me" (a reference to the prohibition of the involvement of minors in religious organizations). Jehovah's Witnesses representatives echoed Manybaev's concerns about limits on proselytizing, as well as restrictions on distributing religious literature. However, these organizations have yet to experience the full implementation of these restrictions.

CAUTIOUSLY PESSIMISTIC

¶7. (C) Catholic Church Bishop Nikolai Mesmer told Poloff that his church had encountered obstacles with visas and re-registration. The bishop said that poor communication between SARA and the Ministry of Justice, the two approving bodies, had delayed re-registration. He added that new priests and nuns from Europe have been preoccupied with securing long-term visas. Mesmer said that although SARA had been helpful, acquiring the proper approvals from the Foreign Ministry had been problematic. According to Bishop Mesmer, SARA Director Osmonaliyev promised to help the Catholic Church resolve these problems. When Mesmer grumbled that the new law would add to his frustrations, Osmonaliyev assured him that the new law "didn't involve the Catholic or Russian Orthodox churches." Mesmer told Poloff that, regardless of Osmonaliyev's assurances, he would remain vigilant in monitoring the new law.

ENEMIES OF THE STATE

¶8. (C) Baptist Pastor and head of the Union of Churches of Evangelical Christians Alexander Shumilin reported increased

harassment of Baptist churches. Shumilin told Poloff that new law provided the authorities new "tools with which to torment us." He claimed that prosecutors and GKNB officers had threatened to close Baptist churches, citing the new law's statutes banning proselytism, the involvement of children in religious organizations, and the distribution of religious literature. Shumilin added that authorities utilize other agencies, such as sanitary and fire departments, to threaten closure of churches.

¶9. (C) Shumilin claimed that his union, in cooperation with a Christian lawyers group, aimed to challenge the law at the Constitutional Court. He added that SARA had promised to include the union in the working group, but the working group had already met without them. He claimed that the government had sought Evangelical Christian groups' input during the law's drafting, but subsequently used that information to develop a more stringent statute.

¶10. (C) Asel Bayastanova, a lawyer drafting the court challenge, told Poloff that the law lacked provisions permitting citizens to gather privately. She also reported that school administrators in Talas and Bishkek queried children about their family's religious beliefs. (Note: Embassy has heard of similar inquiries elsewhere. End note.)

¶11. (C) Hare Krishna leader Chinarkul Muraliyeva told Poloff that her group had not been registered for three years, and claimed that "there was an unofficial order not to register our organization." She said that her 60-member congregation continued to meet covertly. Muraliyeva considered registering as a "Center for Vedic Culture" until contacts warned her that the GKNB knew of her plans.

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COMMENT

¶12. (C) Six months after adoption, the new law on religious organizations has only been partially implemented, but several groups have experienced greater restrictions on their activities. If all organizations are forced to re-register under the new law, the law's 200-member registration threshold may force some groups underground. While a working group and a Constitutional Court challenge would be normal mechanisms to reshape the law, the government may not welcome significant revisions. We will continue to work with SARA to advocate revisions that will provide greater respect for religious freedom.

LITZENBERGER